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A SEASON WITH THE PACIFIC HORNED OWL

BY NELSON CARPENTER

IT is a hot August day in southern California. The nesting season has closed and some of our smaller birds are gathering in flocks. As I sit turning the leaves of well-filled note-books, many pictures of past seasons are brought to mind. The first scene to be recalled as I open each book is one near the home of some pair of horned owls.

The winter of 1903 was the last I spent in San Diego County, and was also the most productive in the way of notes. My first entry that season is dated February 8. It was made as soon as I reached home on a Sunday evening after a long wet tramp that is still fresh in my memory. My brother and I had started out immediately after dinner on a prospecting trip for Bubo treasure. Our destination was a deep canyon two miles from home. A pair of horned owls (*Bubo virginianus pacificus*) had occupied an old red-tail's nest in a tall sycamore for many years, but had selected a cave in a rock pile just above the old site the previous season. This cave I had found by "following my nose" when searching the gulch in 1902.

Instead of going up the ravine the same as usual, that year I went directly over the hill and entered the canyon above the hawk's nest. While scrambling down the hill a strong breeze brought a stench that did not smell like fresh meat by some days. Curiosity always gets the better of me so I followed the scent which soon led me to the bottom of a steep rock pile. Here among a heap of pellets and bones lay a dead horned owl. It took only a few moments to locate the cave, five or six feet above, which contained three fresh eggs half buried in the earth. This cavity was so easy of access that any species of mammal no matter how helpless could have entered without half trying. I packed the set, but it was not without regretting the loss of so faithful a pair of birds. However on the day when my first 1903 note was written my brother and I decided to follow the course chosen the previous year. From the top of the hill the red-tail's nest could be plainly seen and was deserted as we had expected. With little hope we hastened our steps to the rock pile. To our surprise Mrs. Bubo went flopping out from beneath our feet leaving two clean, nearly fresh eggs.

On our way home we met the Dixon brothers, and now that "the ice was broken" we determined to hunt up another pair. Operations began along a small creek near home where a horned owl had been shot from a hawk's nest in an oak tree February 2 of the previous year. The nest contained one egg on that date, but altho the bird had been shot we expected to find another female in possession.

Luck seemed with us; so we pounded the hollow trees and threw rocks at a couple of old hawk's nests but with no results.

Where the creek emerged from a deep canyon we divided our party, two of us climbing the hill to some rock piles while the other two continued up the creek bed. I, of course, was in the party who had to climb the hill. We soon reached our cave, however, and found it just as it had been for years. It was so situated that a fine view of the entire canyon lay before us, so it was an easy matter to follow the movements of the party below. They were two-thirds the way up the ravine and seemed to be having as bad luck as we, when to our surprise an owl flew out from under a large overhanging rock but a few feet to one side of them. One of the party disappeared into the cavern and soon emerged with another set of two nearly fresh eggs.

We were well satisfied with the afternoon's work; so started for home determined to get busy at once and pay other owl homes a visit.

The next Sunday found me fifteen miles from home at a much higher altitude than that where I had been the Sunday previous; for large patches of snow lay on the ground in many places. I knew the exact nest where a family of young Bubos had been reared in 1902, so I made straight for the tree. No leaves had started, so the nest could be distinctly seen for some distance. A nearer approach revealed to me the horns of an owl clearly outlined against a distant hill. Small sycamores are easy climbing with good irons and it took but a few minutes to cover the forty-nine feet of tree-trunk to the nest. One egg was all I saw. Five days later I returned and secured a fine set of three. I also did a little exploring at this time.

The numerous canyons in the neighborhood all contained a number of old hawk's nests. These were bombarded with rocks as fast as I could drive from one to another. I probably had gone a couple of miles and visited a dozen nests before I found that for which I was looking. The old owl left when I threw the first rock and disappeared up the gulch. The nest was a large affair fifty-five feet up in a live oak and one I had never seen before. Imagine my disappointment when I looked over the edge and saw one dirty egg. Closer examination however revealed a crushed one glued tightly to the bottom of the nest. I had no kick coming for the day's trip, so I returned home planning my next excursion.

Washington's birthday was my next opportunity to look for Bubo and I planned a long drive. A twenty-mile ride brought me to the top of a high cliff which had been formed by the gradual wearing of a creek leaving perpendicular walls one hundred feet high on each side. A horned owl flew from an old dilapidated eagle's nest, which proved to be empty. I now began my usual operations of rolling large rocks over the edge and watching results. After a couple of trials I flushed another owl from the center of the cliff. I felt encouraged but could see nothing. I tied my rope to a large rock, slid down to a ledge and worked my way down a crack in the direction of the place where I had flushed the bird. I soon found myself on a shelf about four feet wide and five feet long. A large rock had lodged on the outer edge but behind this lay three Bubo eggs. Rabbit fur and small bones littered the ledge, but made a poor nest lining especially when mixed with a number of pieces of broken stone. As a probable result, I found one of the eggs cracked in several places. I packed the set and in a few moments was at the top of the cliff. This set proved to be nearly hatched, so was prepared only after some difficulty.

After dinner we drove six miles further to a grove of sycamores containing a number of red-tails' nests. The hawks were flying around but had no eggs as yet. However, the tell-tale horns of an owl could be seen above the edge of one of the nests. The structure was the largest in the grove but fortunately in an easy tree and only fifty-five feet up. The nest yielded three nearly fresh, abnormally-shaped eggs. Had they been smaller they would have passed for barn owl's eggs.

Other species of Raptorees occupied my time for the next couple of weeks; but on March 15, just three weeks later, I returned to collect red-tail rent. The first thing I found upon entering the grove was a dead hawk; but still hoping for the best I began to search the grove. Mrs. Bubo had taken possession of another nest very much to my surprise and had two more pointed eggs.

On the Sunday following I made a trip to the mountains after more red-tail rent. I had collected a set of two, two of three, and one of four and found I still

had time to investigate a new canyon. The first tree I found containing a nest was a large live-oak. A stick thrown into the branches flushed a bird, but it was not a red-tail. Yes, another horned owl! The twenty-second of March was pretty late, but the temptation was too great; so up I went fifty-five feet into the very top of the live-oak to be greeted by a rather surprised look from a big bunch of white down. There was an egg also, but it was addled. This I took, for it was the only addled egg of this species I ever found.

One would think that I had all the horned owls in San Diego County corralled by this time. But San Diego County is a large one and but sparingly settled. The more you travel about the more you find. The twenty-ninth of March found me after red-bellied hawk's eggs in the historic San Luis Rey river bottom. I had taken a nice set of three and was about to start for home when a strange nest caught my eye some distance up the river. A stick thrown at the structure flushed a horned owl; but it was late in the day, as well as in season, so I left her without further molestation.

Numerous pairs of owls are not the only things we are thankful for in my locality, for the collector admires the size of the trees. Southern California does not boast of such giant sycamores as those of Illinois in Patrick Henry's time; for my highest record is but sixty-three feet, while fifty feet is a good average.

Escondido, California.

BIRDS OBSERVED FROM MARYSVILLE TO GRASS VALLEY

BY LOUIS BOLANDER

LAST year I had the fortune to attend a surveying party in California from Marysville, Yuba County, to Grass Valley, Nevada County, some twenty-six miles. We also went from Lime Kiln, a place on the line between the last two named places, to Auburn, Placer County.

The first Sunday I crossed the bridge to the south, leading from Marysville into the bottomlands of the Yuba river. What was once orchards and fields is now a waste of bottomlands covered with brush, swamps and trees. This waste was caused by the sediment from hydraulic mines and dredgers up near Hammon City gradually filling the river bed. Marysville, described in older geographies as a city on bluffs at the junction of the Feather and Yuba Rivers, is now surrounded by levees. At this date (May 6, 1906) Marysville was three feet below the bed of the river and in danger of flooding. Even as one enters the bottomlands rows of fruit trees can be seen apparently growing out of the sand and here and there is a house top sticking up, mute evidence of the power of nature over man.

I no sooner entered this barren district than I saw a nest up in an alder tree about six feet from the ground. Upon climbing up I flushed the mother bird, a close sitter, and found one fresh egg of the western chipping sparrow (*Spizella socialis arizonae*). The nest was made of light-colored straws loosely put together, lined with a few black horsehairs, and easily seen from the ground. All the time I kept near the nest the mother kept up a chirping, at the same time flying around in the bushes close to the ground. The male did not come near at all.

About a hundred yards further in the brush I came across a small patch of